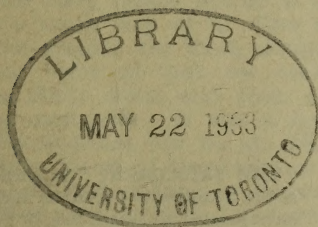


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THE SACRAMENT.



By AN OFFICER.

(pseud.)

LONDON:
Effingham House, Arundel St., Strand, W.C.

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THE SACRAMENT.

WE were fairly fagged out, all of us, after a heavy day of it. One by one we scraped the thick, clinging mud off our boots as best we could, mounted the shaky stairs, and took our places at the mess-table. It was a door resting on biscuit-boxes, but we ate what lay on it ready for us as thankfully as if it had been polished mahogany covered with the whitest damask cloth. The soup cheered us up a bit, but Geoffrey's death lay very heavy on our hearts. Why is it, we said to ourselves, that the best are taken and we rotters left? The other day the General ("Brightest and best of the sons of the morning," always sings away in my mind when I think of him): and now Geoffrey! Tall, cheery, grousing old Geoffrey! We buried him in the little cemetery by the riverside, in a coffin. I saw the Brigadier turn away as he blew his nose, with his handkerchief about his eyes. I know I sobbed, and wasn't ashamed of it. That was why we were so silent. The coloured cartoons from *La Vie Parisienne* that decorated the walls irritated me. What had we to do with *demi-mondaines* at a time like this!—or indeed, as Britishers, at any time. Private Jimmy Frane of the Pierrots came to my mind with his "Let evil be to him that *honi soit*"; but after all I knew

what was in me, and I know that my heart reached out with an unspeakable longing that night.

The smashed windows were covered with some stuff or other that the orderly had picked out of the débris of the downstairs room. It flapped to and fro in the wind. The candles flamed unsteadily in their bottles on the table. The wine stood untouched before us, and the whisky-bottle, though on the table, too, had not been moved. The orderly was trying to get a fire going in the grate; a fire of parquet floor blocks from the ruined school next door. It was frightfully draughty, and through a shell-hole in one wall came the fitful, silent gleams of the Verey lights as they rose and fell over the trenches. There was an extraordinary silence, broken by nothing louder than the crack of a rifle now and then and the fitful noises of the wind. The guns had stopped their barking and roaring after fifty hours of ceaseless shelling.

The orderly had got a fire going and was clearing away our plates and things when a step upon the stairs turned my eyes to the door. It opened, and an officer came in. We all stood up, I don't know why, and he held out his hand and told us to carry on. The orderly was just removing the bread and the wine-bottle when he said: "Just a minute, orderly." The man put the bread and the claret back on the table. The officer took a box that was in the corner by the fire, and drawing it out, sat down upon it. He put his head in his hands; and although not one of us knew him, we asked no question. We were all silent as the grave where Geoffrey lay. But the silence was inexpressibly sweet. Suddenly he stood up and looked at us. "We must cheer up," he said. "After all, it's the day of sacrifice."

It's the day of testing." He gave a faint gesture with his hands as he spoke, and I saw a great scar in the middle of each one of them. In the light I thought I saw blood, and started involuntarily. "You're wounded, Sir!" I exclaimed. He put his hands behind his back as though to warm them. "That was long ago," he answered; "but whenever one of them falls, I feel the pain. When Geoffrey fell," he went on, "I knew how you fellows would all feel it." He got up, lifted the box, and drew it up to the table. "Geoffrey's death," he pursued, "was a sacrifice. Geoffrey was the only child left to his parents. Yet they aren't repining. They are wondering why, but they are satisfied that it was right for him to die. After all, they are proving that they are the seed of Abraham." We wondered what he meant, for our Scripture was rusty. "Geoffrey gave up his job at G.H.Q. simply because his spirit wouldn't let him be away from the forefront, although he knew well that he was the only one of the original officers left, and that barring miracles his turn must come. The General, too" (how was it that he divined our thoughts, because he was not one of ours?), "he had asked if he might come along and help to extricate things over there, though his Division was resting at the time. It is the day of sacrifice, and the beginning of greater troubles. England," he added after a pause, "doesn't really understand. She doesn't remember the lessons of the past. So many of her teachers have been blind. They have forgotten their history, and they worship they know not what. For them 'The Lord' is a term with none of the definite and militant meaning which it had to those of old—to Samuel, to David, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and other men of the Spirit who

took the sword up for the Kingdom's sake. Christ," he pursued, and we were all listening with intentness, "did not take the sword, because it was not the day or the time for it. He, the incarnation of every holy promise and the hope of Israel, came to His own, but they didn't know Him. He tore away the veil and showed them what the Kingdom of God on earth would be. He told them in plain words what its principles were; and opened their eyes to the hideous fact that the more religious a man becomes before his fellows the further he gets from that Kingdom. Religion of such a kind ties men up; imprisons them, and darkens their understanding; that is, the religion that binds to rite and ceremony as well as the religion that openly denounces outward signs and binds to obedience of written things."

He stopped and asked me for the bread. I passed it to him on the plate, and, feeling ashamed that I hadn't thought of it before, asked him if he were hungry, adding: "It's been so thoughtless——." He checked me with a glance. The Major stretched his hand out for the wine-bottle, but the strange officer turned and said in his wonderful voice: "No, thanks; not for me; not yet." Then he changed his tone a little, and looking round on us all, he said: "But I want you all to drink a little to cheer you up. After all, where is the Faith to-day if it's not to be found among you? Come, let us all take a little bread together, and remember the day of agony when the Soldier Son died. Try to remember that He of Galilee was none other than the Lord of Hosts, the Lord strong and mighty in battle. Think upon the coming day when He shall come in power; when the graves that sprinkle all these plains shall open and

give up their ennobled and glorified dead ; when the corrupt matter that made the shell of man shall at the great Call be made eternal and incorruptible. Think of the General and of Geoffrey as awaiting, as anxiously awaiting, the sound of that bugle call. Look on them as sons who went as sheep to the slaughter, willingly and cheerfully. And let us be for ever done with the fictions and fallacies of the blind leaders of the blind. Come"—and he took the bread, and in his strong but scarred hands broke it, passing it to each one of us. He got up himself to do it. Then he poured out the wine into a tumbler, and we took it one from the other and drank it silently. "No need," he said as he took the cup from the Major, "for solemn feelings and such like, is there? The thing is to go on to the end, however bitter it may be." The Major assented. "By George, Sir," he said, "you've cheered me up no end. But won't you have a little wine yourself?" "No," he said, "I'm under a vow on that head. Some day soon, however, we shall drink it together if"—and he paused—"if we endure to the end and overcome even as the Soldier Son overcame."

He got up, and walked to the fire. He warmed his hands a minute, and then turned and walked round the room. He looked at the pictures on the wall, but didn't say a word or move a muscle of his face. Then the Major jumped up. "I'm damn sorry, Sir," he said, and he tore down all the *Vie Parisienne* cartoons. "There's too much of this sort of thing, I know. And I know it's no good." He made a bundle of them and put it on the fire. The strange officer turned round. "There's only one thing that counts now," he said, "and that is Duty," as though he hadn't seen the Major's

action at all. "And if England does her duty she will purge out every offending thing and learn the meaning of the fellowship of saints." His hand was reaching for the door-knob as he went on: "And I'm sure that it will help you all to remember the death of the Son as you've done to-night, and that it will help you to follow His steps. Good-night to all of you." And with this farewell he was gone, out into the wet and windy night.

L. L.